

Until a year or two ago I used to read Telephone Directories. Every time a new one came through the letter box I would quietly fume about what was at one time a compendium of local information both local and telephonic being systematically decimated. In its prime it would have been too big to go through a letter box and eventually there was nothing of interest in it at all. At that stage mine went straight from doormat to recycling bin which I regret today as I set about writing a short history of telephone directories because I cannot look back at a copy to see how poor it had become.

I am not at all surprised to see that the death of Phone Books has been announced.

My interest in Phone Books goes back to the rear end of 1966 when at the age of 23 I was put in charge of Directory Enquiry Services (DQ) and directory production across the GPO's London Telecommunications Region (LTR) in a building since demolished to make way for James Bond next to Vauxhall Bridge.

I suspect I was dumped in that job because they could find no one else to do it when the future was more automation (STD) and International Services (ISD) and a loss making Cinderella service was not a fast track to promotion. The advantage was no boss to interfere with the day to day running of directory services. We were a team of five.

The London Postal Area's (LPA) four Telephone Directories (A-D, E-K, L-R and S-Z) were produced by an entirely female team in a then newish building next door to Old Street Underground station using a manual system called Flexocopy.

DQ and phone directories were obviously closely linked subjects but more so than you might guess. DQ operators had only a full set of public directories to call upon. Four for London, augmented by occasional supplements, and 56 more from around the country filed in such a way that every one of them was within arm's reach.

At a time when telephone ownership was becoming the norm and phone directories consequently growing fatter it was not a system with a long term future.

I recall producing a graph plotting my DQ staff number increases against female school leavers (the nineteen sixties could be very sexist) to show that within a few years every one of them would have to become a DQ operator if the service was to continue. No one seemed to care.

The LTR was bigger than the GLA area is now and included a dozen or more DQ centres to which calls could be routed and load balanced from anywhere in London. Locally there was only Maze Hill but a cheap alternative of my own design was installed in Orpington and Forest Gate while a better engineered standard unit went into Westmoreland Place in Bromley; but it was a losing battle.

How could Telephone Directories be made smaller?

Until the late 1960s and perhaps until a little later, every manned telephone exchange employed an Exchange Clerk who kept records on a card index system. Phone number, line renter, address etc. and changed daily as customers came and went. A copy would find its way to Old Street where hundreds of typed overlapping cards were laid in a large metal frame with only the top line directory information on display.

By some sort of magic which I never got to see, the frames were photographed by Her Majesty's Stationery Office and a couple of months later an enormous heap of paper was ready to be loaded on to lorries.

I experimented with Microfiche derived from the HMSO negatives and found them cumbersome but then discovered a team studying the application of computers in the GPO's HQ in St. Martin's le Grande. They were keen to justify their existence by computerising Telephone Directories and I became their local man setting the specifications and testing systems as required.

Telephone Directory entries are by definition in alphabetical order - or so you might think - but they were not. The Old Street staff knew that B followed A etc. but what was to be done with the O'Learys, the McDonalds, MacPhersons, the French with 'de' in their name or the Dutch with 'van', the apostrophes, hyphens and brackets? There were no set rules and the manager (a Higher Clerical Officer in Civil Service terms) at Old Street did her own thing as did her 56 counterparts elsewhere in the country. Few systems were identical and the differences caused DQ operators to be slower than ideal and complaints were made when they failed to find entries. I knew of several names that would catch them out every time.

The HQ computer team said they would use ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) rules for every directory so as to achieve consistency; something we have all taken for granted for many years.

Somehow the word got around that The Post Office Corporation, as it was by then known, was going to publish directories which were not in alphabetical order and the Daily Mail led a widely supported press campaign against any change. It probably didn't help that French Phone Books were not published in name order.

The rumour was nonsense and I visited an insurance company where the instruction was to file policy documents in a warehouse in 'Phone Book order' to explain. I soon proved that they were already arguably more sensible than the HCO in Old Street because directory sequence was inconsistent.

A Daily Mail journalist came to see me and I explained what we planned to do with directories and at the end of the interview he read back to me what he had written. I remember the ensuing conversation as if it was yesterday. "That is nothing like what I said to you." "I know, but it is what I am going to print."

Next morning a colleague threw a copy of the Daily Mail on to my desk. I was front page news and let out a loud expletive unbecoming of a 1960s office.

I might have been in serious trouble over that interview except that it was in

the presence of LTR's Principal Press Officer who knew the truth. Ridiculous as it might seem now, the Chairman of the PO Corporation was forced to resign.

Eventually the day came when the computer boys said they were ready to print. The target was to have an A-D on the streets within nine days of pressing the Start button but to go live on a London Directory was seen as too risky so we went for the Sunbury-on-Thames local instead. A copy landed on my desk two days later but with all the bad publicity surrounding it one of the big bosses - I remember his name - ordered me to check every single entry against the source data.

A team of 14, if I remember correctly, DQ operators read and compared every entry and found 32 discrepancies. Exactly what one might expect of a week old directory and much better than any manually produced copy. The boss ordered me to pulp the lot.

The reprint was probably just as 'bad' but we didn't let on. I think the first LPA Directory to be produced by the Derby based computer was the S-Z but don't take that for Gospel.

I only found one serious bug in the system, if there was an input error in the source data it was at first almost impossible to delete it for reasons which I had better not go into if this report is to ever end.

There were only two serious customer complaints one of which came from the airline industry; Air India from memory. Unlike their competitors there was a hyphen in their name which caused the computer to list them separately from the Air Everything Elses. I think they dropped the hyphen when ASCII based systems became the norm.

The other was from The Sun (Newspaper) who found themselves listed among a long list of pubs, however we got away with that one because I had written to them with a warning that if they didn't add the newspaper suffix to their name the computer would turn them into a public house. They told me where I could go. They were The Sun and that was it!

The impact on DQ services was massive. No paper books to be taken off shelves, just a screen to be interrogated and when the required number was found, press a button and the computer spoke the number to the caller allowing the operator to get on with the next call.

All those school girls were safe.

I never got to see the DQ service gradually decline and disappear; I was shunted into another dead end job. Computerising the Telegram Service, but I saw the Telephone Directories which I helped improve and become an essential item in every home and office become redundant in the age of the Internet, smart phones and nobody wanting their name in the Phone Book anyway.